

Abstract 603

TITLE: Behaviors, Beliefs, and Choices of HIV-Positive Peer Counselors: A Holistic Approach To HIV Risk Reduction

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ISSUE: Many HIV prevention efforts have had limited success addressing secondary transmission; data on the behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes of transmission among HIV-positive persons are scarce. In 1995, the AIDS Survival Project (ASP), an AIDS Services Agency in Atlanta, received funding from the state of Georgia for a prevention program to examine w ct the choices peer counselors make in their own lives regarding risk behaviors. A steering committee of peer counselors and HIV health professionals oversees the project.

SETTING: Peer counselors are HIV- positive volunteers at ASP who provide emotional support and information to people affected by HIV/AIDS. The majority of peer counselors are self-identified gay men. This study implements a program that identifies areas of health and risk in the lives of peer counselors, providing ongoing training toward a healthier lifestyle and promoting a prevention message to the greater population.

PROJECT: The steering committee created a Risk Behavior Measurement Tool addressing: whether the volunteers are sexually active; what the volunteers consider to be safer sex; when and if they are using protection in sexual activities; and attitudes toward interpersonal issues such as disclosure and self-worth. This tool is administered longitudinally to all peer counselors every six months (89 peer counselors have completed the tool at least once with 290 completed tools [N]). Analysis of the results drives the content of monthly in services in an effort to address current counseling and interpersonal needs in regard to risk reduction.

RESULTS: The grant is ongoing; however, analysis of data already collected yields extensive information for the entire population of peer counselors, including: 1) an increase in participants' perception of self-worth; 2) a decrease in self-identified risky behaviors; and 3) a decrease in sexual activities without disclosing status. Other data raise questions for further study. For example: 1) among those in engaging in sexual activities without disclosing status, a decrease in behavior self-identified as containing no risk; and 2) a persistent, significant minority of peer counselors engaging in self-identified unsafe behaviors.

LESSONS LEARNED: We make decisions based on a variety of intellectual, emotional, and intuitive factors. Among gay men in particular, there is ongoing debate as to the value of HIV prevention efforts. There is also ambivalence about the objective risk of transmission from certain behaviors in light of a subjective interpretation of the value of those behaviors. The data from the instrument reflects this situation; it also reflects that peer counselors tend to make intentional choices about their sexual behavior from a variety of well-reasoned perspectives. The program achieves its goals most effectively when it provides a context for group discussion and support to understand the choices one makes.

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